Women's Studies in Communication Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 2004

The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess

Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario

The popularity of the princess in Disney feature animation, merchandise, theme parks, and ice shows makes her one of the best known models of princess construction. This analysis of the Disney princess looks at her in terms of her position in the kingdom, her relationships to *femme fatales*, fathers, and bad boys, and her performance in a genre largely shaped by film musical and fairytale.

The princess is a fairytale staple and even in the world's republics, she continues to be re-drawn. She has remained a relevant anachronism over centuries, through revolutions, wars and globalization. Some have sought to reveal her beauty as stereotype, her good-nature as submissiveness, but still she prevails. One of the most prolific authors of the princess today is the Disney organization which produces her in animation, theme parks, on the stage, and in merchandise. Combined with Disney's popular and global profile, this makes the Disney princess in effect the "princess of all princesses," and, although she was born into the paternal world of Walt Disney, she is, especially in the latter decades, putting her own stamp on the kingdom.

That kingdom is an international conglomerate whose studios produce animated musical features; its corporate logo is its castle. The princess who emerges from this kingdom is not the same princess who emerged from the tales of Perrault or the brothers Grimm, or from the folklore of the past at all. In terms of the genre, Lutz Röhrich (1986) notes: "People have charged the fairytale with being untrue, fanciful, and anachronistic. In fairytales, antiquated social relationships are thought to emerge, which are reproached with being rooted in the feudal period and with offering role models from the patriarchal world" (p. 6). This interpretive tendency is evident in the field of Disney Studies, the field of multi-disciplinary

Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario recently earned her Ph.D. from The Centre for Drama and Theatre Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. She wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the guidance of Peter Fitzpatrick in exploring and refining the ideas in this essay and the comments of the reviewers and editor on the essay's earlier drafts. Their encouragement and insight are much appreciated. The essay is a result of the author's research into Disney's animated and theatrical musicals for her Ph.D. dissertation.

criticism bent to the Disney phenomenon. Jack Zipes (1995) suggests that Disney's features encourage audiences "to long nostalgically for neatly ordered patriarchal realms" (p. 40). Janet Wasko (2001) says that "the worlds represented in Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* are patriarchies, in which society is dominated by men" (p. 136). Henry Giroux (1999) writes of "female subordination" (p. 102) in the Disney features and Disney, in respect to its architectural projects, staking "a claim on the future through its nostalgic view of the past" (p. 88). Mainstream Disney Studies in general presents a retrospective picture: a princess caught in an aggressively patriarchal society. It is a view perhaps encouraged by the avuncular nature of the corporate image. Walt Disney, who created the company and promoted himself as a familial American symbol, is dead, but his signature is constantly re-inscribed on the corporate ramparts.

In this paper, I explore the role and functions of the princess in the kingdom of the Disney corporation and studios. In so doing, I will deconstruct her nostalgic and patriarchal positions and investigate the conjunctions of Hollywood, fairytale and musical that inform her. The influence of the latter is particularly significant, but is underrepresented theoretically in Disney Studies. Animated features portraying the princess are consistently musicals and the folk musical, dual-focus narrative model proposed by Rick Altman (1989) has bearing on the narrative structure of courtship in these features. Some work on Disney features, particularly that of Elizabeth Bell (1995) and Sharon D. Downey (1996), in fact complements the musical model, and I will be making reference to their analyses where appropriate.

This paper will concentrate primarily on the two pivotal eras of Disney feature animation, on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) from the period in which the studios were run by Walt Disney himself, then on *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992) and *Pocahontas* (1995) from the period approximately two decades after the death of Walt Disney in which the studios come under the control of "Team Disney," the executive management group led by Michael Eisner. These selections stem from a strict definition of princess that is based on birthright rather than on the marital conclusion. The heroines who become princesses as the resolution of a romantic narrative perform a fundamentally different role from those heroines who are born daughters of a hereditary leader. These fathers become especially important in latter-day Disney, paternal bonds more intimately examined than at perhaps any other time in the stories of the princess. Early Disney separated princess

from father and king and the circumstances empowered the *femme fatales*: rulers of men and queens of their own domain. (See for example Bell's description of Disney *femme fatales*.) Yet, if Walt Disney's lifetime marked the father's absence, Team Disney's re-affirmation of a closer bond suggests the company's own paternal attachment to the more challenging daughters of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first, to whom Walt Disney himself is little more than a black and white photograph of a rather old-fashioned looking man.

Walt's Princess: Nostalgia and *Femme Fatales*

One of the major difficulties of dealing with Disney feature animation is that it is caught in a perpetual time loop created by the Magic Kingdom, and thus the day-to-day histories of the princess tend to be under-recognized. The Magic Kingdom, quasi-medieval, but riddled with anachronism, seems to perpetuate a timelessness detached from social progress, yet it is a timelessness continuously updated and re-invented by the studios and marketers. The characters are carried over indefinitely into theme park attractions and merchandise; ice shows, parades, and even stage productions adapt the features for alternative media, extending their performance potential; and the features are themselves on cyclical re-release through the cinema, television, video, and DVD. The watercolors of the original *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* poster, in which the characters all posed around a coquettishly curtseying princess, are for example reanimated on the 2001 DVD re-release with bright purple and an air-brushed profile of the princess gazing with desire at a sparkling apple as scarlet as her lips.

David Forgacs (1992) argues that by "keeping its products forever young and forever available . . . Disney rewrites its own history, either erasing the period quality of its earlier films, or playing on that very period quality as part of the nostalgia industry" (p. 374). What is now perceived as the period quality of the features has always been innovative in its time, reflecting cinematic advancements from the first use of sound and color to continuing developments in Computer Generated Images (CGI). The princess has thus always been rendered in the cinematic trends occurring at her original release. Disney actually maintains her contemporaneity in its dual aspects: maintaining the original design, while successively renewing its appeal by re-rendering her in new releases, marketing, and merchandising. Disney does not precisely erase her original quality, so

much as create continuity between that quality and her contemporary audiences. Thus the animation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* available on DVD, while matching that of the original print, is re-released and packaged using the technology and aesthetic of the early twenty-first century.

Disney's creation of a sense of timelessness has in itself led to a form of perpetual reading and analysis, whereby a feature is in a constant state of being read and criticized, often alongside both earlier and later features. While this timelessness in itself offers fascinating opportunities for understanding the relationship between Disney and its audiences, and, in particular, the multiplicity and diversity of possible readings and constructions of the princess, the "nostalgia industry" tends to obscure the daily experience that initially informed the princess's role in each feature. Karal Ann Marling (1999) argues: "We have false memories of the Disney films of our childhoods, I think. In retrospect, they seem sugar-pie sweet and neatly detached from the problems of the culture in which they were conceived, made, and marketed" (p. 27). It is sometimes necessary to cut through the nostalgic poses that the princess seems to undertake to get to the original conditions of her role in Disney storytelling.

The features emerge from the everyday existence of Disney studios, and the castles and royal occupants from circumstances of that existence. Röhrich (1986) writes that "depictions of the fairytale castles we read about clearly do not proceed from the inhabitants of real castles. Instead, they are re-cast from the narrator's day-to-day world" (p. 7). Hence, the village storytellers produced princesses who had to spin, wash, and mind the animals. These homely chores remained with the princess in early Disney features like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty*, but were not depicted as her rightful occupation. Always housekeeping was imposed upon her, and it became apparent that she was merely concealed behind this inherited drudgery, waiting to be revealed in new form by the storytelling props of popular music, cinema, and white goods. Disney's castle was not the abode of the "wealthy peasant" (Röhrich, 1986, p. 7), but of the early twentieth-century middle class and Hollywood itself, home to the starlet princess only superficially obscured by the vestiges of her peasant past.

So in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, released in 1937, the evil and jealous Queen—described by Marling (1999) as "mainly Hepburn, with a soupçon of Crawford and the lips of Bette Davis" (p. 27)—attempts to conquer Snow White's beauty by turning her into the castle drudge; but the

prince falls in love with her, able to see past the patched dress, wooden clogs and bucket. And in Disney's world it all seems so natural that this prince on his white horse should fall in love at first sight with a girl dressed as a scullery maid who sings to birds. Under the peasant costume, Snow White is a 1920s/'30s starlet with a flapper's haircut, rosebud mouth, and high-pitched warble. She matures in the Depression and is happy to pitch in with the working class dwarves in times of high unemployment and poverty until she is found once again by her prince, a matinee idol who bridges the gap between Rudolf Valentino and Tony Curtis. This was the princess of early Hollywood, the Hollywood in which Walt Disney and his colleagues began working.

By 1959 and the release of *Sleeping Beauty*, the three good fairies give up their magic wands for housework in order to protect and conceal Princess Aurora from the evil fairy, Malificent (who has failed to consider that these three might give up the convenience of magic to live in a peasant cottage). Aurora is a prototype Baby Boomer. She wanders barefoot in the woods and is uninterested in the affairs of kings, devastated when she learns she is a princess and will not be able to make her date with the boy she met in the woods. Her princely counterpart falls off his white charger, skinny dips in a forest stream, and when his father blusters that he can't marry a peasant girl, responds reasonably, "Now, father, you're living in the past. This is the fourteenth century." Marling (1999) describes Aurora as "Barbie's medieval cousin" (p. 27) and, strikingly, she is contemporaneous with the first appearance of Barbie, likewise in 1959, a doll representing an idealized American teen. Aurora's world is the world of the first true American teenagers, when Brigitte Bardot began her career, *Rebel Without a Cause* was just four years old and Elvis Presley was the king of rock and roll. Although Malificent—the fairy with the outdated glamour of the '40s—may want her to prick her finger on a spinning wheel (yet another vestige of her rustic roots) and so die, Aurora awakes from the curse in the 1959 feature, her past metaphorically left behind, leaving her ready for the '60s.

These princesses are also contemporaries of Disney himself, making them Walt's princesses. Walt Disney is perhaps, more than any other fairytale teller with the exception of Mother Goose, portrayed as a fairytale figure himself. Moreover he is portrayed not as a storyteller—as for example Hans Christian Andersen has been immortalized in film—but as both prince and king of his own magic kingdom. His statue stands in the theme parks bearing his name and his birthday is celebrated with royal

fanfare there. Some would argue that if you look for the king or prince in the early Disney features, you look not within the animation, but without to Disney himself. Zipes (1995) offers such an argument. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*:

> . . . the prince can be interpreted as Disney, who directed the love story from the beginning. If we recall, it is the prince who frames the narrative. He announces his great love at the beginning of the film, and Snow White cannot be fulfilled until he arrives to kiss her. During the major action of the film, he, like Disney, is lurking in the background and waiting for the proper time to make himself known. When he does arrive, he takes all the credit as champion of the disenfranchised, and he takes Snow White to his castle . . . . (p. 38)

Zipes positions Snow White as subordinate to the male, for even though the prince is a minor presence,[1] there is no king at all, and the feature is named for the princess, the feature exists within an encompassing fairytale in which Disney rules the kingdom.

In the narratives of the features, however, there are tales of female conflict and grounds for a quite different view of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The film begins with a prologue describing the relationship between the Queen and her stepdaughter, then focuses on the Queen ensconced in the castle, issuing orders;[2] it ends with her stepdaughter perched on the prince's horse[3] surveying the horizon from which emerges a castle and kingdom of her own. The opposed representations of womanhood in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* therefore frame the narrative—the first mistress of a kingdom, the second poised to supplant her. As Bell (1995) notes, "their physical similarities were remarkable" (p. 121), both being pale, raven haired beauties. The Queen's jealousy is actually directed at a younger version of herself, now ready to succeed her. The mirror announces that Snow White has already become more fair than the Queen. Snow White's fear of the Queen is in turn virtually psychotic. When she flees on the hunter's warning, she becomes trapped in a dark, grasping wood of her own imagined fear, branches that look like wrinkled hands snagging her dress and cape, only to collapse at last in a clearing revealed as green and spring-like, filled with young animals. Her flight illustrates threat as dark and old and safety as bright and young.

The Queen's ultimate crime is performed in the form of an old hag who offers the possibility of true love to the princess in order to entice her to bite into the poisoned apple. The apple motif, of course, recalls the Garden of Eden narrative; but Snow White as Eve is tempted by an old woman signifying mortality, and it is not the knowledge of good and evil that lures her, but her own desire for true love. Yet true love hints at sexual knowledge and maturity yet to be discovered by the ingénue, but that has already given the wicked Queen the power she jealously attempts to guard from her rival. The film offers three distinct "ages of woman," all of which are in conflict (magical, psychological, and physiological). Bell (1995) writes: "On the Disney cultural and somatic timeline, the young heroines will become their stepmothers" (pp. 121-122). The timeline in later features comes as Bell indicates, to encompass the grandmothers and elderly fairies. These venerable female figures ensure the path to true love for their young protégés, unlike their masquerading forebear who deceptively promises true love in order to vanquish.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, the elderly fairies are the actual rescuers of the princess, simply working through the prince. Philip has been chained in Malificent's dungeon—she has even set up her own castle, appropriately known as the forbidden mountain, to challenge the authority of the kings—and it is up to the three tiny, elderly fairies to rescue him. Once they break his chains and lead him out of the dungeon, they present him with sword and shield, conjured up by their wands; then, as he rides to the rescue of the princess, it is the fairies who constantly smooth his way. They transform arrows aimed at him into flowers and rocks thrown at him into bubbles. Malificent turns herself into the proverbial dragon in a final bid to bar Philip's way to Aurora, and although he seems to deliver the sword thrust that kills her, it is the fairies who concentrate their magic upon it; they who chant "now sword of truth fly swift and sure." In effect, Philip is simply the vessel of their magic and although he marries Aurora, it is the fairies that have the final "word": Merryweather and Flora continue to alter the color of Aurora's dress from pink to blue and back again. The fairies, without any vested, social power, still exert considerable power in the kingdom, even sending the entire kingdom and its kings to sleep to await Aurora's re-awakening, likewise indicating Aurora's significance to the kingdom.

The transitions on the timeline between the generations of Disney women are not, however, simple, but complex rites of passage, with power wrested from one generation by the next not through nurturing familial

bonds, but through socially constructed relationships: stepmothers and fairy godmothers, rather than mothers and grandmothers. The emphasis is not on ties of blood, but on the social covenants between women. *Sleeping Beauty*'s plot revolves on the enmity between the female fairies with their powers to bless or curse and on the fate of the princess, to which the kingdom's fate is directly linked. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a tale of feminine power conflicts and the fear and enticement of maturity as women move from one age to another.

The conflict between the princess and her mature adversary is often read in terms of daughter-mother relationships, with the mature adversary acting as a wicked maternal substitute, simultaneously erasing the mother and replacing her with a negative image. Yet, I would argue that the conflict has more to do with female authority than with maternal issues. The seminal work of formalist Vladimir Propp (1968) in creating a morphology of Russian folktale is oft-quoted in fairytale literature, though its application is, admittedly, limited in terms of the overall fairytale genre. Nonetheless, his definitions provide a basis for discussion of the princess's functions in storytelling. Propp defines seven spheres of action around the dramatis personae of folk tale: villain, donor, helper, princess and her father, dispatcher, hero, and false hero. There is, notably, no maternal role and the role of characters like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*' wicked Queen align most closely to villain. The princess, according to Propp, is "a sought-for person" (p. 79), but why is she sought? Her sphere of action concerns "the assignment of difficult tasks" and "recognition" (p. 79): the privileges of authority. Propp notes that she "and her father cannot be exactly delineated from each other according to functions" (pp. 79-80), and theirs is the sole sphere dominated by two. What is significant is that the father is king, but is defined in terms of his family relationship to the princess, incidentally the only family relationship in the morphology. Together with the recognition that the hero/prince is linked to his successful suit for the princess, this suggests that it is the princess with whom authority is identified. Thus, the king can be quietly "done away with" without jeopardizing that sphere of activity. As king's daughter and then (another) king's wife, the kingdom's fate actually rests with the princess, and in narratives such as that of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty* it is the princess, rather than the hero, who logically becomes the central figure.

This authority of the princess is probably best described in DreamWorks' *Shrek* (2001). Jeffrey Katzenberg, a founding member of Dream-

Works and one of *Shrek*'s producers, was also an influential figure in Team Disney, supervising features from *The Little Mermaid* to *Pocahontas*. *Shrek* is a parody of contemporary fairytale telling, which is to a degree shaped by the Disney studio. In *Shrek*, the villain, Lord Farquaad, gets his hands on a magic mirror, recalling *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Farquaad asks whether his "kingdom" is the most perfect, only to have the mirror point out that, technically, his is not a kingdom, because he is not a king. That can be fixed, however, if he chooses one of the three available princesses, one of whom is a generic Snow White. Here the connection between kingdom and princess is explicit, the parody unmasking one of the certitudes of fairytale. The princess (Princess Fiona) he chooses is trapped by a female dragon, a veritable pink *femme fatale* with false eyelashes who blows heart-shaped smoke rings. Princess Fiona is aware of her own archetype, so she specifically poses as Sleeping Beauty and expects to be awakened by a prince, ready to serenade her and ride off with her on his charger once the she-dragon is defeated. That is where things begin to go all wrong, but the premise of the tale recognizes what story elements have become entrenched in the structure of fairytale: namely, a princess who can make a hero a king, a prince as rescuer, and a "dragon," or *femme fatale*, from whom the princess needs rescuing.

Marina Warner (1995) argues that the absence of the mother from Propp's main definitions and her distribution through the other spheres of action, "inadvertently reproduces the weight of male power in the wonder tale, and the consequent alliances which set women against women; the tension erupts within the stories as female dissension and strife" (p. 238). It is in the Disney features where male power is reduced or erased, however, that the greatest tension is created between women. The jealous queens and evil fairies may not be mother substitutes; rather they may be usurpers, eager to disrupt the passage of power represented in the princess and so retain authority themselves. They repress and victimize the princess through her childhood, attempting to keep her passive and obedient. While there is a general tendency to read the princess's passivity in patriarchal terms, it is apparent that her passivity has more to do with the ambitions of the *femme fatale*. The passage of power through the princess *is* ostensibly patriarchal: she ensures the kingdom's continuity as first, daughter and later, wife and thus validates majesty. However, it is in that function of validation that real female power lies. Thus the *femme fatale* attempts to keep the princess under her power, and failing that, to render her unconscious, thereby unable to validate the majesty of king or prince. The

part of *femme fatale* is perhaps not surprising in an age of Hollywood that had Bette Davis, Joan Crawford and Mae West directly challenging patriarchal order with heightened femininity. Bell (1995) notes that through the animation of the *femme fatale:*

> Disney artists have constructed a powerful critique of patriarchal discourses: the inefficacy of divine right of kings is both drawn and storied in contrast to the potency of women's evil and their dangerous and carnivorous threats to order. The *femme fatale* construction of feminine excess begins the wicked pentimento of Disney evil . . . . (p. 117)

This becomes particularly apparent in the roles of *Sleeping Beauty's* Malificent and *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula, the first of Team Disney's *femme fatales*. Both greatly resent their treatment at the hands of kings and wreak havoc on the kingdoms, using the princess as their prime tool for revenge. The kings are helpless. Despite their exalted status, they cannot protect their daughters. Aurora's father, King Stefan, even hands his daughter to three little fairies for protection and King Triton, despite his superior physique and magical trident, is helpless to break the deal Ariel made with Ursula and can only offer himself as forfeit, leaving his daughter completely unprotected. Kings are powerless, almost irrelevant, when faced with the *femme fatales*.

What the *femme fatale* really wants, however, is to rule the kingdom herself, so it is when the princess is on the brink of womanhood and has found her lover that the *femme fatale* moves from simply victimizing the princess to actively seeking her destruction. This is the moment where the passage from daughter to wife puts the full weight of the kingdom's future interests on the shoulders of the princess. The *femme fatale* uses the princess's first true love against her in order to secure the kingdom for herself. It is while Snow White is being serenaded by her prince that the Queen cooks up her plan to have her murdered and her heart put in a casket. When planning to poison Snow White with an apple, the Queen discovers that the antidote is love's first kiss, but reasons that before the prince can return, Snow White will already be buried alive and so, in effect, sexually inaccessible. Malificent's curse on Aurora takes the form: "The princess shall indeed grow in grace and beauty, beloved by all who know her. But, before the sun sets on her 16th birthday, she shall prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die." Not only is the curse

waiting to fall upon her on her 16th birthday, but that is also the day Aurora meets Prince Philip and falls in love. Like Aurora, Ariel, the little mermaid, is 16 when she sees and falls in love with Eric and it is then that Ursula decides she would make "a charming addition to my little garden" of worsted mer-folk. Her incipient passage from daughter to wife leaves both the princess and her kingdom vulnerable. Chaos thus ensues when she turns 16 and falls in love, for the *femme fatale*s, as Bell (1995) writes, "cast their spells, not only on their young women victims, but on the entire society from which they are excluded" (p. 117).

The days of the *femme fatale* were, however, numbered with the advent of Team Disney. The second part of this article looks at the inheritance of the *femme fatale* and the contemporary princess.

The Team Disney Princess: Just a Little Bit Bad

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella* (1950)—and *Sleeping Beauty* may be included—Warner (1995) suggests that the animators "concentrate with exuberant glee on the towering, taloned, raven-haired wicked stepmother; all Disney's powers of invention failed to save the princes from featureless banality and his heroines from saccharin sentimentality. Authentic power lies with the bad women" (p. 207). That was in the days of the *femme fatale*, but when Team Disney began to draw the princess, things had changed and the princess herself absorbed some of the exuberance of the *femme fatale*, while the prince began to be drawn with more personality. Shortly after Disney began to revive its animated fortunes with the animated/live action *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), in which red-haired Jessica husks "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way," the equally flame-haired Ariel arrives and she *is* a little bad and falls for a prince named Eric, described by director John Musker as "one of the guys" (Kurtti, 1997, p. 170) rather than the standard "charming."

The *femme fatale* has one last stand in *The Little Mermaid*, but she is a grotesque parody. She doesn't simply tower, she expands, suffocates and overwhelms. Roberta Trites (1991) describes her as "an overweight, ugly woman" (p. 150), but the significance of Ursula's larger-than-life shape—the animators chose the round, tentacled octopus as the basis for Ursula after testing flatter, spikier scorpionfish and manta rays (Kurtti, 1997, p. 169)—and heavy make-up is that she has it within her power to be a lithe, brunette princess. She assumes this form in order to foil Ariel's courtship of Eric by bewitching him herself. That Ursula has it in her power to be

a stereotypical vixen and yet remains gloriously rapt in her larger-than-life guise is part of the particular parody: the *femme fatale* turned camp diva. As Jane Feuer (1993) suggests, a "queer" reading of musical moves attention from narrative to "performative and spectacular elements (an emphasis on the numbers)" (p. 141). Ursula coincides with the return of Disney's animated musical, and she is also the only *femme fatale* who takes on the princess in song and dance. From Ursula, Ariel learns the tricks of the *femme fatale*'s trade in the number, "Poor Unfortunate Souls," rich in visual and verbal commentary on sexuality, warning "don't underestimate the importance of body language." Bell writes that "the titillation of burlesque underscores the commodification of the heroines in the marriage plot, while distancing them from complicit participation in those plots" (p. 115). One can also read Ariel's use of the burlesque in its musical form. She consciously performs "cheesecake" poses, mimicking the traditions of a Busby Berkeley dancer as Bell suggests (p. 114), but it is all performance of a "memory" of film musical, queer and cheesy. Ursula and Ariel conspire to perform what is now a folk memory of film musical's juxtapositions of divas and ingénues, but in the end the performance is stripped away: Ursula is revealed as the outlandish camp shadow of the *femme fatale*, and Ariel puts aside her burlesque performance to undertake her dual princess roles as daughter and wife.

The Little Mermaid marked the return of both the princess and the fortunes of Disney animation. Ariel, however, also heralded a period in which the designation of princess was less prim, more democratic. Propp's definition of the princess has further, particular significance in analysis of Disney features, for his definitions were known by the studio. Christopher Vogler (1999), who worked as a story consultant at Disney and whose original *A Practical Guide* influenced storytelling at the studio, writes:

> . . . as I worked with fairytale motifs as a story consultant for Disney Animation, I encountered another way of looking at the archetypes—not as rigid character roles but as functions performed temporarily by characters to achieve certain effects in a story. This observation comes from the work of the Russian fairytale expert Vladimir Propp. (p. 30)

Vogler argues: "The archetypes can be thought of as *masks*, worn by the characters temporarily as they are needed to advance the story" (p. 30). The princess wasn't necessarily fixed in her role at the Disney studios:

there was opportunity for the princess to remove her mask, and thus perform other functions, as well as opportunity for other heroines to put it on.

Many Disney heroines at times wear the princess mask, for the appellation of princess is not exclusively tied to social status. For example, Disney heroines with inventors and soldiers as fathers—Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and Mulan in *Mulan* (1998), respectively—have been called "princess." "Princess" merchandise ranges in Disney stores include such non-princess heroines as *Peter Pan*'s (1953) fairy, Tinkerbell, and Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* (1951).[4] The "princess" label can even be extended to encompass dogs, cats, and lions: the Ladys, Duchesses, and Nalas of films like *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *The Aristocats* (1970) and *The Lion King* (1994). In the Disney kingdom the title is increasingly democratic, with the princess no longer embodying a regal ideal as she did in her prime under Walt Disney.

In earlier Walt Disney features, the princess and prince danced in regally denotative ballet styles when they met and performed for each other. When Philip comes upon Aurora, she is gracefully spinning in a performance of "Once Upon a Dream," and he introduces himself by taking up the classical steps and the words. Bell recognizes these balletic poses and postures as traditional codes built into the construction of Disney princesses and princes:

> Borrowing the forms of classical dance and grafting them onto teenaged fairy-tale heroines, Disney artists ask viewers to elide from established and elitist conventions for spectatorship to the animated, politically "innocent," and popular conventions of song and dance. Indeed, the Disney apparatus buys into and then sells the twofold fantasy of little girls who want to grow up to be princesses *and* ballerinas. (p. 111)

The posture of the early princesses, with teenage girls going about their chores practically *en pointe*, shifted dramatically into more "democratic" and popular forms of dance and movement. Team Disney's princesses, including Ariel, *Aladdin*'s Jasmine, and *Pocahontas*'s Pocahontas, move with grace, but it is the grace of sportswomen. Ariel performs underwater feats and rescues Eric from drowning in a storm: lifeguard rather than ballerina. Jasmine can pole-vault tall buildings in a single bound. Pocahontas dives off waterfalls, sings a solo while shooting the rapids and

duets while running cross-country. They enact a shift from the "princesses" of ballet to the "heroes" of sport. Heroism, egalitarianism and autonomy are slipped into the conventions of Disney princesshood.

The princess's "choreography" is indicative of the musical genre in which she operates. Musicals often concern romance, but Joseph Swain (1990) argues: "The truth is that, despite appearances, falling in love is not the action of a traditional musical; indeed, the fact that the leading couple are in love is never seriously in doubt. Rather, the action is concerned with surmounting obstacles to their living happily ever after, in the tradition of classic comedy" (p. 153). This partly indicates the dominance of the *femme fatale* in the features of Walt Disney: she is the one who—literally—conjures the mounting obstacles. Rick Altman (1989) further questions the standard assumption that the musical is chiefly driven by the simple promotion of a romance: "To be sure, the musical *looks* as if it can be properly defined by a linear, psychological model, but this impression is created by no more than a veneer, a thin layer of classical narrativity which we must learn to look beyond, discovering instead the radically different principles of organization which lie just beneath the surface" (p. 17). Marriage, or an equivalent conclusion, remains the end of the musical, but rather than a means to a romantic end, functions as a temporary resolution of conflict and paradox represented in the couple: "the American film musical has a dual focus, built around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values" (Altman, 1989, p. 19). Altman's dual focus narrative model becomes particularly relevant in Team Disney features, in which the princess and her lover come from different societies, although it is likewise present in *Sleeping Beauty* in that Aurora and Philip initially believe themselves to represent a royal/peasant duality, which in turn threatens the traditions of the kingdoms. That threat, however, would become much more apparent under Team Disney.

While the features under Walt Disney took place within the traditions of an age of conspicuous production in film musical, by the 1960s production was declining, as was its success at the Disney studios. Altman (1989) speculates that "the musical's audience changes radically in the late fifties. From family entertainment, the musical rapidly becomes the fief of the youth crowd" (p. 359). Walt's last princess, Aurora, in 1959, coincides with this change in audience. Team Disney's first princess, Ariel, arrived after a gap of thirty years. The success of *The Little Mermaid* took many by surprise, but the reasons for it are manifold. One of those reasons lies in the musical itself. Altman identifies the change in audience. Walt's

princesses were "family entertainment," but those princesses belonged to a previous age, a golden age of American stage and film musical. Ariel is less "family" entertainment than "cross-generational." She appeals to parents and children, but also to teenagers. The director, Ron Clements, notes: "It became a date movie" (quoted in Wloszczyna, 1997, p. 01D). *The Little Mermaid*, along with films in the late 1970s and '80s like *Grease* (1978) and *Dirty Dancing* (1987), re-invented the musical as teen musical: a self-reflexive, nostalgic, yet remorselessly contemporary offshoot of the genre.

More specifically, these teen films re-invented the folk musical. The folk musical, according to Altman, "projects the audience into a mythicized version of the cultural past" (p. 272). Previously, that mythicized past had been the American frontier and new towns and cities. But beginning in the late 1970s, for musicals such as *Grease*, which sought to appeal to a new youth audience, the past was usually rooted in the syntax of the 1950s at the birth of the contemporary American teenager. Bell (1995) recognizes the folk tradition of the Disney studios insofar as the stories are concerned and notes that "under the creative auspices of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, Disney returned to these folk roots" (p. 107). Ashman, in particular, is credited with a role in the revival of Disney animation, with Michael Eisner referring to his hiring as the "most important creative decision we made on *The Little Mermaid*" (Eisner & Schwartz, 1998, p. 183). Ashman, the feature's lyricist, participated in the early development of the feature as musical. His musical background—Ashman co-authored the off-Broadway hit, *Little Shop of Horrors*—was pivotal in *The Little Mermaid*'s acclaim. *The Little Mermaid* is not so much a return to folk roots as the forging of new folk roots through Ashman's reflections on the musical past.

The feature is a twofold folk musical, recalling both the music and teenage culture of the 1950s, and also the choreographic epochs of the early American film musicals. As I mentioned earlier, the choreography of "Under the Sea" recalls Busby Berkeley musicals, Berkeley being a recognized, major influence on choreography in early film musicals. The sea creatures form patterns in their dance and the animation simulates the different camera angles common in the films, including the top-shots and intercut footage. The mermaids themselves seem to project the Berkeley style with their formations and flirtatious demeanor, and Bell notes that "the latest folk heroines tease with the conventions of burlesque" (p. 114), a burlesque which would be familiar to Berkeley audiences. The Berkeley

musicals, which stand out for their distinctive imagery, provide a clear pictorial style upon which the new folk musicals draw. And interwoven with the references to the picturesque, not of the past American landscape as in earlier folk musicals, but of past American film musical itself, are also references to an idealized 1950s.

In *USA Today* Susan Wloszczyna (1997) says *The Little Mermaid* "didn't break the mold as much as reshape it for a generation weaned on rapid-fire, MTV-style editing and Nick at Nite nostalgia" (p. 01D). Her comment complements Feuer's (1993) description of the impact of *Dirty Dancing* on the film musical genre as one that "represents, not separation, but fusion into a new set of conventions more palatable to the teen audience than those of the classic musical" (p. 131). *Dirty Dancing* was released only two years prior to *The Little Mermaid*, while the latter was in production. They share unmistakable characteristics, not the least of which is their common utilization of a teen folk-past rooted in disapproving fathers and handsome, forbidden "bad boys"—a folk-past gleaned from the kind of '50s nostalgia of *Happy Days* and *Grease*, whose leather-jacketed teen idols and pop music were presented with the technical expertise of the late twentieth-century.

Both films are about 16-year-old girls—Ariel in her lilac and green, colors often associated with the U.K.'s suffragette movement, and Baby intending to join the peace corps. Both are "Daddy's little princess," with the relationship of father and daughter foregrounded. Ariel's older sisters with their pearls and elaborate coiffures mirror Baby's elder, fashion-conscious sister, contextualizing the baby sisters' rejection of the kind of feminine expectations of their elder siblings. Both girls enter territory forbidden to them and find their bad boy prince dancing there: Baby entering the staff area of the summer camp where Johnny is dancing at an employees' party; Ariel leaving the ocean to go to the surface where Eric is dancing aboard ship. The "bad boy" with his quick feet performs as spectacle for the view of the peeping princess, literally attracting her eye. Altman (1989) notes that Joe Coyne's dancing performance in *The Merry Widow* "heavily marked" (p. 136) the musical genre,[5] and, followed by such dancers as Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and even John Travolta, it became a case of, to quote Altman: "What man needs a voice if he can . . . dance" (p. 136). Neither Johnny nor Eric sing, but both are excellent dancers and their physical confidence is part of their attraction for the princesses, who themselves feel dissatisfied with their bodies—Ariel longing for legs rather than fins, Baby feeling awkward.

The human and animated couples mirror each other physically. Baby and Ariel have matching silhouettes, in each case, their developing female forms emphasized through exposure of the midriff and the drawing of attention to the bra. In parallel scenes, Baby and Ariel also rise from the water, signifying Venus, just when they are gaining control of their own bodies and sexuality. Johnny and Eric are both coiffed like James Dean or Elvis Presley, icons of teen culture, and both are powerful in the torso and wear tight trousers. Their physical proportions substantiate the opposition of their gender to that of the princesses. In learning to move together, whether in dance or action, the couples discover their inherent compatibility. Baby and Ariel's fathers are, however, disapproving of the lovers. The daughters consequently complain of not being heard as they attempt to explain their feelings and so take recourse in disobeying their fathers' rules. The daughters then indebt their fathers by taking on "underage" debt themselves. In each case, the object of the commitment miscarries: Ariel faces being turned into an anemone by Ursula, while Baby not only pays for an illegal abortion that goes wrong, but is also shamed by publicly acknowledging her affair with Johnny. Both daughters then must face the disappointment of their fathers and the consequences of their bad judgment. Each "princess" also rescues her lover from two terrible predicaments. Ariel saves Eric from drowning, and subsequently prevents his marriage to the grotesque Ursula. Baby steps in to keep Johnny from losing his dance spot at a nearby club, and later keeps him from being fired for stealing. In each film, the lover reciprocates and rescues the princess from the bleak future of loneliness and perpetual rule by her father. The fathers thus discover the worth of the unacceptable suitors, acknowledge that their "little princesses" have grown up, and give their blessing to the romantic commitments the daughters have made.

Underlying the courtship is thus the princess's struggle for autonomy and her function of representing that autonomy. Ariel's longing for legs, captured in song, is rooted in her desire to dance like the girls on land: "bright young women, sick of swimmin,' ready to stand." Baby's longing to learn to "dirty dance" in part expresses her desire to stop being a little girl, uncomfortable in her own body. They both want to grow up and the process is realized physically and emotionally through experimentation with their bodies and increasing reliance on their own judgment rather than their fathers'. Chris Richards (1995) notes that "be it in *The Little Mermaid* or, more substantially, in *Dirty Dancing*, for girls there is a visible proof of bodily autonomy and self-control implicit in being seen to

dance, to present a body enacting intention" (p. 147). In Walt's princesses, as discussed by Bell, this was seen through the regal symbolism of ballet, uniting the princesses with their equals in the ritual *pas de deux*, but in the teen folk musical, the princesses learn forbidden dances, go into forbidden places, desire forbidden princes. At 16, they cross the threshold of womanhood and investigate a world that has been taboo and beyond a father's rule.

The Disney Princess: Sexuality and Rule

Sexuality and rule become intertwined in the Disney feature. It is indicative of the presence of dual subgenres of folk and fairytale musical and their influence on the construction of the princess and her functions. In folk musical Altman (1989) writes: "woman is the source of life—the land, the mother, the one who attracts the seed, nourishes it, helps it grow, and brings the new fruit forth" (p. 317). In fairytale musical, woman represents the state of the kingdom. Whereas in the traditional folk musicals like *Oklahoma!* (1955) and *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), the woman was aligned with domesticity, the Disney musical retains the fairytale orientation to the kingdom and the sexuality of the princess as it represents the continuity of rule: she is both source of life and source of rule. However, in the case of Disney's teenage princesses, her function is self-centered, directed to self-discovery and self-rule rather than obedience to dictated masculine or feminine roles.

The sexuality of the princess appears incongruous in features deemed suitable for young children, but the princesses of Team Disney, including Ariel, Jasmine, and Pocahontas, have all been read through sexual thematics. Roberta Trites (1991) argues that *The Little Mermaid*, through the witch, "blatantly equates love with sexuality" (p. 147) and Bonnie J. Leadbeater and Gloria Lodato Wilson (1993) write of the "unambiguous expression of 20th century sexual desire by the Disney mermaid" (p. 471). Sean Griffin (1994) describes *Aladdin*'s Arabian scene, as constructed by the West: "the East as a setting to 'dress up' and 'play out' various sexual identities" (p. 71). And of *Pocahontas*, noting in particular the iconography of America in female form, Ziauddin Sardar (1996-97) writes:

> The drawing of Pocahontas in the cartoon version makes her the most sexually endowed of all the female forms that appear. Or as Mel Gibson puts it in the Disney television documentary: "I mean, Pocahontas is a babe, isn't she, you've got to say it." (p. 18)

Sardar adds: "Within the family viewing conventions of Disney, there is no doubt that the lusty manhood of John Smith is aroused by his first glimpse of this icon of America" (p. 18). The equation of the princess with her sexuality, however, can be read beyond the immediate courtship terms of sexual desire and attractiveness and through her dual function as source of life and rule: wife and daughter.

The interdependence of father and princess identified in Propp's morphology can be re-construed in the primary positioning of the princess as "Daddy's little girl." Ariel is the youngest of seven daughters and favorite of King Triton. Jasmine is the sole daughter and heir of the Sultan. Chief Powhatan's beloved only child is Pocahontas. Not one of Disney's princesses has a mother or brother. The absence of mothers in fairytale and in Disney is often remarked. Lynda Haas's essay, "Eighty-six the Mother," (1995) specifically addresses the absence of the Disney mother: "mothers are either sentimentalized or disdained; in either case, their identity and their work are simultaneously erased, naturalized, and devalued" (p. 196). Warner, in a chapter devoted to "Absent Mothers," notes of fairytale in general that the "absence of the mother from the tale is often declared at the start, without explanation, as if none were required" (p. 210). Yet, while the absence of the mother is often noted and critiqued, largely unremarked is the absence of a brother or other male heir. The conditions of patriarchy rely on the passage of power from male to male, father to son. If the Disney kingdom, and, indeed, fairytale in general, supported the natural privilege of patriarchy, presumably the princess would always have a brother or other male relative poised to succeed her father. But she doesn't.

This predicament in fact informs the narrative of *Mulan*, one of Disney's features which, while not operating on the traditional concept of princesshood, nevertheless features a heroine who at times adopts the archetype. Mulan has a mother, one of the few heroines to have a living mother in fact, but she has no brother. This is underscored by the naming of her pet dog, Little Brother. Mulan is highly conscious of having no brother, particularly when war comes and her ailing father must fulfill the family's conscription obligations in the absence of a son. To prevent her father's inevitable death should he fight, Mulan herself undertakes the role of son and soldier. She is successful, but when she returns from the war to her father with the tokens of her success as family scion, her father responds: "The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter." The father celebrates his *daughter*. Not one Disney father wishes for a son or

remarks on the absence, implicitly condoning the disruption of patriarchy by a daughter. It is the disruption of patriarchy by the daughter that is the focus of the narratives, limiting the relevance of mothers and sisters and actually "eighty-sixing" brothers, uncles, and grandfathers.

Yet whereas in Propp's morphology father and daughter function as one unit, this is not the case in Disney features. There is discord in the government of the kingdom and it is not stirred by the *femme fatale*: it is signalled from the moment the princess is introduced. Ariel forgets to perform in her father's concert and breaks his injunction against going to the surface. Jasmine has her pet tiger take a bite out of the pants of a suitor approved by her father and tells her father bluntly: "The law is wrong." Pocahontas is conspicuous in her absence from the welcoming party for the warriors and when her father advises her on her choice of husband with the metaphor of the steady river, she contradicts it: "The water's always changing, always flowing." In the syntax of the fairytale musical, Altman (1989) identifies "the love/government parallelism": "The kingdom is in disarray—a fact made all the more salient by the kingdom's insularity and smallness. The [young] ruler's love life is deficient—a situation lamented by the entire kingdom. Solution: simultaneous resolution of the two plots, the one dependent on the other" (p. 149). In the Disney features, however, the kingdom is already showing signs of strain in the relationship between father and daughter. She wants change, he wants stability. She wants to make her own choices, he wants to rule her. The father/princess relationship serves as the parallel to the government, where father represents traditional, somewhat autocratic, law and order, and the princess's function is to represent autonomy and openness.

The resolution of their opposition is effected through the dating of the daughter, a romantic function that in fact has great significance for the kingdom itself. In a variation of Altman's model, the fulfillment of the princess's love life can save the kingdom. The king's love life, after all, is already resolved. In each feature, the king is a widower and past his prime, often white-haired. The kings are consistently neither young and eligible nor involved in any romantic relationship or entanglement of their own. The full interest of the kingdom thus rests on the future love life of the princess. Fulfillment can only be reached, however, by addressing the disparate views of the princess and the king regarding a suitable "date" for her. Andreas Deja, animator of Triton, Ariel's father, drew on the responses of his own father when his sisters dated, particularly his insistence that things be "played by his rules" (Kurtti, 1997, p. 169). With its

implications for the future of the kingdom, the question of who the princess dates comes to embody the essential difference between father and daughter. In each case, the father proposes a steady, conservative suitor, someone rather like himself. Triton is at first happy to hear that Ariel is in love, assuming she has chosen a merman. The Sultan invites suitable princes to the palace to woo Jasmine. Chief Powhatan gives Pocahontas the happy news that the best warrior, Kocoum, wishes to marry her. In each case, the fathers choose suitors of their own approximate status. The fathers are consequently dismayed to learn that these suitors do not suit the princesses. The princesses instead choose outsiders who appear to threaten the stable future of the kingdom and who do, in fact, change the status quo: humans, street rats, and English adventurers.

In the Team Disney features, the subtext of dating returns to the essential syntax of the musical genre identified by Altman (1989), in which the couple represent in parallel storytelling their own different values (p. 19). Downey (1996) identifies this syntax in her analysis of *Beauty and the Beast*: "*BB* juxtaposes interdependent but competing male and female stories" (p. 193). The parallelism presented by Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is, however, different from that of the princess stories, for like *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*'s heroine, Belle, is not born a princess, but rises to that status as an enterprising debutante, intent on civilizing the world. Cinderella clothes and names the mice. Belle teaches Beast to eat porridge politely. They both look for the perfect crinoline dress for the ball and find true love in the waltz, which, as Altman argues, "encapsulates in music and in dance the forbidden and yet desirable, beautiful nature of the whirling, tempting, gay life of aristocratic Vienna" (pp. 135-36). The princesses of the ilk of Ariel, Jasmine, and Pocahontas have no need to aspire to a forbidden aristocracy: they already are aristocratic. They do, however, desire change and openness and so they choose a "bad boy," a forbidden prince who is contrary to the custom of the kingdom and will force the kingdom to become less insular. In effect, the social journey of these heroines is in the opposite direction.

Their journey is paralleled by that of the heroes. The courtship narrative itself explicitly privileges neither princess nor hero, matriarchy nor patriarchy. The parallel in fact suggests an alternative way of focusing on the romance, which sees it not as driven principally by a linear development of the princess's desire for marriage, but by an equal, shared interest in finding love. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel's first sight of Eric is paired with Grimsby's assertion to Eric, "the entire kingdom wants to see you settled

down with the right girl." Eric, we learn, is returning to his kingdom having not fallen in love with a Glauerhaven princess. He insists he will find the right girl and it will "bam, hit me like lightning." His statement acts as a cue: lightning does strike as a storm arrives, sinking the ship, and leading to Ariel's rescue of the prince. The consequent courtship is driven as much by Ariel's attempts to win Eric's kiss as by Eric's search for the girl who saved him, the girl he intends to marry. The three day countdown in *Aladdin*, at the end of which Jasmine is required to wed, is paralleled by Aladdin's desire to be her bridegroom and his three wishes. With Genie's offer of three wishes, Aladdin talks of Jasmine: "But she's the princess. To even have a chance, I'd have to . . . hey, can you make me a prince?" Aladdin's attempts to pass as a prince and thus wed Jasmine in fact cue the fulfillment of Jasmine's desire to see the world and have her own choice of consort. Rejecting the "handsome sturdy husband who builds handsome sturdy walls" in *Pocahontas*, Pocahontas rejects submission to the grim and commanding Kocoum. Her story intersects with that of English adventurer John Smith—both initially seeking new landscapes to explore and then acting in tandem to convince their respective peoples to pursue peace—but at the end it is Smith who asks her to return to England with him and Pocahontas who chooses to remain with her people. Rather than the patriarchal reading in which princess simply becomes bride, the dual focus of the courtship creates the possibility of an equal match between hero and princess. The hero's desire for love and his potential as a bridegroom make him a worthy partner to the princess, and their mutual desire for the match refutes the tradition in which the princess acquiesces to an unequal union in order to ensure political or familial peace.

The dual focus of the Disney features also reflects that of the fairytale musical subgenre in that "one side of the couple is identified with reality, the other with the imaginary, divine, or unreal" (Altman, 1989, p. 154). When *The Little Mermaid* opens, viewers see the ship sailing on the ocean surface and the sailors telling Eric of the mysterious mer-kingdom, while his manservant scoffs. When *Aladdin* opens, a peddler tells the audience of the story of a young man "who was more than what he seemed": Aladdin, a common thief who dreams of life in the palace, prompting a passing prince to scoff: "you were born a street rat, you'll die a street rat." The opening of *Pocahontas* shows the English ships about to set off for the new world, America, with the sailors asking John Smith what it will be

like. In each case, the hero's perspective roughly equates with that of the audience: he is part of "our" world, but dreams of another world. The consequent feature is the realization of his dreams. The features then present parallel scenes in which the princess is shown in the world dreamed of, but she is dissatisfied with it, transgressing its rituals and traditions, seeking her own path beyond its social and cultural borders. Ariel longs to know about the humans, Jasmine longs to go outside the palace, and Pocahontas longs to discover more about the English.

The features continue to juxtapose the "real" world of the hero and the "unreal" world of the princess. Curiously, it is the dreamed world that is shown as restrictive: its potential cannot be fully realized. The hero may be common, but he does offer a way for the princess to make her desire "real," while the princess offers the hero magic and idealism. When Eric shows Ariel around his kingdom, he gives her the chance to experience the human life she has longed for, while Ariel offers Eric the idealistic experience of love that will "hit me like lightning." Aladdin gives Jasmine the means to escape the palace, while Jasmine offers him the chance to realize his dreams of becoming something other than a street rat. John Smith gives Pocahontas the chance to learn what is "waiting just around the riverbend," but Pocahontas instructs him on the spirituality and magic of her own land: "Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the blue corn moon?" as she sings in "Colors of the Wind."

Through their courtship, the couple simultaneously resolves the disparities between reality and dreams. The princess is able to win her father over to her point of view on the kingdom's future by showing him the value of her choice in date and the validity of her commitment to what he represents. Eric and Ariel thus defeat the mythic dangers of the ocean, embodied in Ursula, and create détente between ocean and land. Jasmine and Aladdin dissemble the restrictive laws of the kingdom to open it to influences from around the world: Jasmine and Aladdin's courtship takes place on a magic carpet ride from the palace to China, Egypt, and Greece, while their final wish releases the Genie to go on a world trip. Smith and Pocahontas erase their cultures' parochial constructions of the "savage" and work for peaceful negotiation between peoples. In each case, the new government forged is less insular and the princess is reconciled to both father and lover.

The status quo is thus successfully challenged and altered through the conventions of the romance itself.

Conclusion: Not Just Song and Dance

Walt's princesses scrubbed and waited with boundless cheerful energy, knowing that these chores of their peasant past would be taken from them and they would again waltz into a regal future. They twirled like ballerinas and sang of princes who would come and dreams that would be fulfilled. Team Disney's princesses undertake no chores, neglect their obligations, and run wild. Their drawing elucidates a sporting challenge to the status quo. When they sing, they sing like Pocahontas of "what I dream the day might send just around the riverbend," like Jasmine that "I've come so far, I can't go back to where I used to be," and like Ariel to "ask 'em my questions and get some answers." The functions of the princess outlined by Propp (1968) have become progressively proactive, for the tasks she assigns are now her own tasks to fulfill by introducing autonomy, openness, and recognition of her own choice, whether of husband or simply of her own future.

If the princess does indeed represent authority, if she is the key, after all, to the kingdom, the shift in her role is significant for she is now questioning and expanding the definitions of her role. She still exists ostensibly in a patriarchy in which her father has vested power, but where once it was the role of the *femme fatale* to disrupt patriarchal continuity, under Team Disney, the princess herself has taken an active role in the disruption. That disturbance is resolved, often romantically, does not in itself suggest that the princess returns to a subordinate gender role. She has effected the resolution and her choice is always honored: there is no return to the former patriarchal structures. Thus, Pocahontas can even decide against marriage to John Smith by choosing to remain with her tribe in a diplomatic role. Propp's delineation of the princess's function to "recognize" the hero as prince has evolved into her function to determine the new nature of the kingdom/s. Pocahontas remains to oversee the new "kingdom" she has engineered, but even Ariel and Jasmine, who choose to marry their heroes, do so not simply to obtain husbands, but as an exercise of their regal prerogative, irrevocably changing the status quo by choosing a consort contrary to accepted norms.

The Disney kingdom may still seem a man's world, but it is a man's world dependent on a princess.

References

Altman, R. (1989). *The American film musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Bell, E. (1995). Somatexts at the Disney shop: Constructing the pentimentos of women's

animated bodies. In E. Bell, L. Haas, & L. Sells (Eds.), *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture* (pp. 107-124). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Downey, S. D. (1996). Feminine empowerment in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast. Women's Studies in Communication 19, 2*, 185-212.

Eisner, M. D. & Schwartz, T. (1998). *Work in progress*. London: Penguin Books.

Feuer, J. (1993). *The Hollywood musical* (2nd ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Forgacs, D. (1992). Disney animation and the business of childhood. *Screen 33, 4*, 361-374.

Frayling, C., Schwartz, Z., Godfrey, B. & Wells, P. (1997). Disney discourse: On caricature, conscience figures and Mickey too. In P. Wells (Ed.), *Art & animation* (pp. 4-9). London: Academy Group Ltd.

Giroux, H. A. (1999). *The mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Griffin, S. (1994). The illusion of "identity": Gender and racial representation in *Aladdin*. *Animation Journal 3,1*, 64-73.

Haas, L. (1995). "Eighty-Six the mother": Murder, matricide, and good mothers. In E. Bell, L. Haas, & L. Sells (Eds.), *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture* (pp. 193-211). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kurtti, J. (1997). *The art of the Little Mermaid*. New York: Hyperion.

Leadbeater, B. J. & Lodato Wilson G. (1993). Flipping their fins for a place to stand: 19th- and 20th- century mermaids. *youth & society, 24,4*, 466-486.

Marling, K. A. (1999). Are Disney movies really the devil's work? *culturefront, 8,3&4*, 25-28.

Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the folktale*. L. Scott (Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Richards, C. (1995). Room to dance: Girls' play and 'The Little Mermaid.' In C. Bazalgette & D. Buckingham, (Eds.) *In front of the children: Screen entertainment and young audiences* (pp.141-150). London: British Film Institute.

Röhrich, L. (1986). Introduction. In R. B. Bottigheimer (Ed.) *Fairy tales and society: Illusion, allusion, and paradigm*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sardar, Z. (1996-97). Walt Disney and the double victimisation of Pocahontas. *Third Text 37*, 17-26.

Swain, J. P. (1990). *The Broadway musical: A critical and musical survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trites, R. (1991). Disney's sub/version of Andersen's *The little mermaid. Journal of Popular Film and Television, 18,4*, 145-152.

Vogler, C. (1999). (2nd rev. ed.) *The writer's journey: Mythic structure for storytellers and screenwriters*. London: Pan Books.

Warner, M. (1995). *From the beast to the blonde: On fairy tales and their tellers*. London: Vintage.

Wasko, J. (2001). *Understanding Disney: The manufacture of fantasy*. Cambridge: Polity.

Wloszczyna, S. (1997, June 18). Muscle behind 'Hercules': Disney duo Musker, Clements do it again. *USA Today*, p. 01D.

Zipes, J. (1995). Breaking the Disney spell. In E. Bell, L. Haas, & L. Sells (Eds.), *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture* (pp. 21-42). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Notes

[1]While Zipes (1995) argues that the prince is "the focal point by the end of the story" (p. 39), he actually occupies a rather minor role in the feature. Animator, Zack Schwartz, points out that males, including princes, presented a problem in early Disney animation because they responded to women in "plain embarrassment" (Frayling et al., 1997, p. 5), adding, "*Snow White* is saved by the fact that the Prince makes a very short appearance at the beginning and at the end, but it's an obligatory appearance" (p. 6). Rather than being a focus, the role of the prince was minimized. He is introduced responding to Snow White's song with one of his own, then simply and inexplicably disappears for the bulk of the action. Nothing is known of him in this time, no deeds, no adventures, indeed, no names are attributed to him and he returns at the end still singing the same song as at the start. Moreover, he is frequently found drawn differently in Disney literature and merchandise. A brunette in the feature, he is a red head in the original press books and his features alter in reproduction sericels (a form of artwork based on animation cells) sold today. Even his design suggests a lack of definition that does not support his status as a focal point.

[2]In both *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty*, there is significant evidence of women issuing orders both to men and to other women, where the orders issued by men are generally of less narrative importance and are addressed to other men, rather than to women. This in itself could suggest that the patriarchal status quo of the kingdoms is somewhat uncertain.

[3]Note that Snow White is given the superior, regal position on horseback while the prince acts as her groom.

[4]The characters are included in Disney's Classic Doll Collection, released in Disney Stores in 2001 and advertised as "Princess Dolls" in the 2001 Christmas brochure.

[5]Altman is writing specifically in terms of the "fairy tale" subgenre, which also exerts an influence on Disney features, as will be discussed later. Yet, the influence of the dancing hero on all musicals is evident irrespective of his particular subgeneric associations.